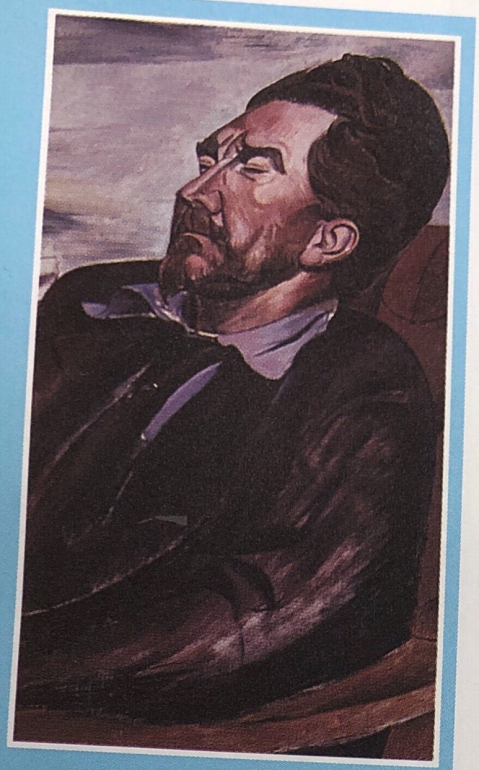
EZRA POUND



1885–1972

More than any other poet, Ezra Pound was responsible for the dramatic changes that occurred in American poetry during the Modern Age. Urging writers to "make it new," Pound influenced many poets of his day to discard the forms, techniques, and ideas of the past and to experiment with new approaches to writing poetry.

Pound was born in Hailey, Idaho, and grew up in Philadelphia. After studying at the University of Pennsylvania and at Hamilton College, he traveled in Europe, where he spent most of his life. Settling in London and later moving to Paris, he became a vital part of the growing Modernist movement. He influenced the work of the noted Irish poet William Butler Yeats and that of many American writers, including T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, H. D., Marianne Moore, and Ernest Hemingway. He was also responsible for the development of Imagism, a literary movement that included Williams, H. D., and Moore.

Despite Pound's preoccupation with originality and inventiveness, his poetry reflects a deep interest in the past. In his early work, he often drew upon the poetry of ancient cultures, including Chinese, Japanese, and Provençal French. His dense, complex poems tend to be filled with literary and historical allusions. Often his poems are difficult to understand, because they are void of explanations or generalizations.

After 1920 Pound focused his efforts on writing *The Cantos*, a long poetic sequence in which he expressed his beliefs, reflected upon history and politics, and alluded to a variety of foreign languages and literatures. He eventually produced 116 cantos, which are widely varied in quality.

In 1925 Pound settled in Italy. During World War II, he was an outspoken supporter of the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, mistakenly believing that a country governed by a powerful dictator was the most conducive environment for the creation of art. In 1943 Pound was indicted by the American government for treason, and a year later he was arrested by American troops and imprisoned. After being flown back to the United States in 1945, he was judged to be psychologically unfit to stand trial and was confined to a hospital for the criminally insane. He remained there until 1958, when he was released largely because of the efforts of his friends in the literary community. After his release he returned to Italy, where he spent the remainder of his life.

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

In a Station of the Metro; The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter; Canto 13

Literary Movements

Imagism. Imagism was a literary movement established in the early part of the twentieth century by Ezra Pound and other poets. As the name suggests, the Imagists concentrated on the direct presentation of images, or word pictures. An Imagist poem expressed the essence of an object, person, or incident, without explanations or generalizations. Through the spare, clean presentation of an image, the Imagists hoped to evoke an emotional response—they hoped to freeze a single moment in time and to capture the emotions of that moment. To accomplish this purpose, the Imagists used the language of everyday speech, carefully choosing each word and avoiding any unnecessary words. Avoiding traditional poetic patterns, they also attempted to create new, musical rhythms in their poetry.

Because they generally focus on a single image, Imagist poems tend to be short. In their length and focus, many Imagist poems reflect the influence of the Japanese verse forms *haiku* and *tanka*. The haiku consists of three lines of five, seven, and five syllables. The tanka is written in five lines of five, seven, five, seven, and five syllables. Like Imagist poems, haikus and tankas generally evoke an emotional response through a single image.

Focus

"In a Station of the Metro" captures an impression of a crowd of people waiting on a dark subway platform. Freewrite about the types of impressions you have when you glance at a large crowd of people.

Primary Source

In the March 1913 issue of *Poetry* magazine, Pound published a set of "rules" for poets. Consider how his rules apply to poetry and to other kinds of writing.

> It is better to present one image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous words.
>
> Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something.
>
> Don't use such an expression as 'dim lands of peace.' It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol.
>
> Be influenced by as many great artists as you can, but have the decency either to acknowledge the debt outright, or to try to conceal it.

In a Station of the Metro[1]

Ezra Pound

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

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1. **Metro:** The Paris subway.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What image does this poem bring to mind?
2. How would you describe a crowded subway or train station?

Recalling

3. What is the setting of this poem?

Interpreting

4. Pound compares the faces of people on a subway platform with "petals on a wet, black bough." (a) What does this comparison suggest about the effect of society on individuality? (b) What does the comparison suggest about the frailty of human beings?

Applying

5. How does the image in the poem compare with your own image of the faces of people on a subway platform or at a train station?

Analyzing Literature

Understanding Imagism

Imagism was a literary movement that focused on evoking emotions through the spare, clean presentations of images, or word pictures. The Imagists also emphasized the creation of new rhythms, the use of common language, and precision in choosing words.

1. In "In a Station of the Metro," Pound juxtaposes, or puts together, two images to capture an impression of faces quickly glimpsed on a dark subway platform. What emotions does the combination of images evoke?
2. Considering the common meaning of apparition as a strange figure appearing suddenly and thought to be a ghost, why do you think Pound chose the word *apparition* rather than *appearance*?
3. How does this word contribute to the emotional impact of the image?

Learning Options

1. **Art.** Reread "In a Station of the Metro." Then close your eyes and capture the main image of the poem. Draw what you see. Share your drawing with classmates.
2. **Writing.** Capture the essence of an object, person, or incident in an Imagist poem of your own. You might try your hand at writing a haiku (consisting of three lines of five, seven, and five syllables) or a tanka (consisting of five lines of five, seven, five, seven, and five syllables). To freeze and capture the emotions of a single moment in time, make sure that your language is both precise and suggestive.

The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter

Ezra Pound

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:[1]
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the lookout?

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-to-yen,[2] by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river
Kiang,

---

1. **Chokan** (Chō′ kän′): A suburb of Nanking, a city in the People's Republic of China.
2. **Ku-to-yen** (kōō′ tō′ yen′): An island in the Yangtze (yäng′ tsē) River.

Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Cho-fu-Sa.[3]

By Rihaku

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3. Cho-fu-Sa (chō′ fo͞o′ sä′): A beach along the Yangtze River, several hundred miles from Nanking.

LANDSCAPE ALBUM IN VARIOUS STYLES
Ch'a Shih-piao
The Cleveland Museum of Art

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. How does this poem make you feel?
2. Which image do you find most striking? Explain.

Recalling

3. Summarize the events in the life of the river-merchant's wife.

Interpreting

4. This poem is adapted from a Chinese poem by Li T'ai Po. When the original poem was written, marriages were arranged by parents according to Chinese custom. (a) How did the river-merchant's wife feel at the time of her marriage? (b) How are these feelings conveyed? (c) How have her feelings for her husband changed since the time of their marriage?
5. How do the details of the setting in the fifth stanza indicate the passage of time?
6. (a) How does the river-merchant's wife feel about her husband's absence? (b) How do the descriptions of the monkeys and butterflies reflect her feelings?

Applying

7. Many societies have believed in arranged marriages. What do you think are the benefits and the drawbacks of arranged marriages both for the individuals involved and for society as a whole?

Thinking and Writing

Writing About Imagism

Although "The River-Merchant's Wife" is not a pure Imagist poem, it does possess a number of the characteristics of Imagist poetry. Write an essay in which you discuss these characteristics. Review the poem, noting the simplicity and precision of its language, its use of imagery to evoke emotions, and its musical rhythm. Write a thesis statement, and organize your notes into an outline. Then write your essay using passages from the poem to support your argument. When you revise, add transitions to connect your ideas.

Canto 13

Ezra Pound

Kung[1] walked
by the dynastic temple and into the cedar grove,
and then out by the lower river,
And with him Khieu, Tchi
and Tian the low speaking
And "we are unknown," said Kung,
"You will take up charioteering?
Then you will become known,
"Or perhaps I should take up charioteering, or archery?
"Or the practice of public speaking?"
And Tseu-lou said, "I would put the defenses in order,"
And Khieu said, "If I were lord of a province
I would put it in better order than this is."
And Tchi said, "I would prefer a small mountain temple,
"With order in the observances,
with a suitable performance of the ritual,"
And Tian said, with his hand on the strings of his lute
The low sounds continuing
after his hand left the strings,
And the sound went up like smoke, under the leaves,
And he looked after the sound:
"The old swimming hole,
"And the boys flopping off the planks,
"Or sitting in the underbrush playing mandolins."
And Kung smiled upon all of them equally.
And Thseng-sie desired to know:
"Which had answered correctly?"
And Kung said, "They have all answered correctly,
"That is to say, each in his nature."
And Kung raised his cane against Yuan Jang,
Yuan Jang being his elder,
For Yuan Jang sat by the roadside pretending to
be receiving wisdom.
And Kung said
"You old fool, come out of it,
Get up and do something useful."

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1. Kung: Confucius (551?–479? B.C.), Chinese philosopher and teacher. Confucius emphasized devotion to parents, family and friends, ancestor worship, and the maintenance of justice and peace. Khieu, Tchi, Tian, Tseu-lou, Thseng-sie, and Yuan Jang were his disciples.

And Kung said
"Respect a child's faculties
"From the moment it inhales the clear air,
"But a man of fifty who knows nothing
Is worthy of no respect."
And "When the prince has gathered about him
"All the savants and artists, his riches will be fully employed."
And Kung said, and wrote on the bo leaves:
If a man have not order within him
He can not spread order about him;
And if a man have not order within him
His family will not act with due order;
And if the prince have not order within him
He can not put order in his dominions.
And Kung gave the words "order"
and "brotherly deference"
And said nothing of the "life after death."
And he said
"Anyone can run to excesses,
It is easy to shoot past the mark,
It is hard to stand firm in the middle."

And they said: If a man commit murder
Should his father protect him, and hide him?
And Kung said:
He should hide him.

And Kung gave his daughter to Kong-Tch'ang
Although Kong-Tch'ang was in prison.
And he gave his niece to Nan-Young
although Nan-Young was out of office.
And Kung said "Wang[2] ruled with moderation,
In his day the State was well kept,
And even I can remember
A day when the historians left blanks in their writings,
I mean for things they didn't know,
But that time seems to be passing."
And Kung said, "Without character you will
be unable to play on that instrument
Or to execute the music fit for the Odes.
The blossoms of the apricot
blow from the east to the west,
And I have tried to keep them from falling."

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2. Wang: The first emperor of the Chou Dynasty, ruling China from 1122 to 1115 B.C.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What would you do to "become known"? How might Kung react to your proposal?
2. How important do you think it is to have order within yourself?

Interpreting

3. This poem presents a dialogue between Confucius, or Kung, and several of his disciples. Confucius first asks his disciples how they will "become known." When they have finished responding, he comments that each has answered correctly "in his nature." (a) What does this comment reveal about his attitude toward his disciples? (b) What does the fact that he "smiled upon them equally" reveal?
4. What attitude concerning youth and old age does Confucius express?
5. (a) What does Confucius mean when he speaks of a person who has "order within him"? (b) Why is it important for a person to have "order within him"?
6. (a) If the "blossoms of the apricot" symbolize the ancient Chinese culture and its traditions, what do you think Confucius means when he says that the blossoms are blowing "from the east to the west"? (b) What does he mean when he says that he has "tried to keep them from falling"?

Applying

7. What ideas does Confucius express that are applicable to life in our society?

Learning Option

Writing. Use Kung's statements as a model for writing a series of statements that reflect your philosophy of life. Like Kung, you might comment on order, brotherly deference, and moderation. Introduce each statement with the phrase *And* _____ *said,* filling in your name.

Primary Source

Unlike the letters in our alphabet, which generally have no meaning by themselves, each Chinese character stands for a complete concept or image. As such, the written Chinese language is particularly well suited to metaphor, the key element in Imagist poetry. Imagist Ezra Pound consequently regarded written Chinese as the ideal poetic language.

In "The Chinese Written Character as Medium for Poetry," written with Ernest Fenollosa, Pound explored the connection between metaphor, poetry, and the Chinese written language. He wrote:

"Metaphor, the revealer of nature, is the very substance of poetry . . . Poetry is finer than prose because it gives us more concrete truth in the same compass of words. Metaphor, its chief device, is at once the substance and nature of language. Poetry only does consciously what the primitive races did unconsciously. The chief work of literary men in dealing with language, and of poets especially, lies in feeling back along the ancient lines of advance.

. . . I have alleged all this because it enables me to show clearly why I believe that the Chinese written language has not only absorbed the poetic substance of nature and built with it a second world of metaphor, but has, through its very pictorial visibility, been able to retain its original creative poetry with far more vigor and vividness than any phonetic tongue. . . ."